

When we think of the word communion, we think not only of the actual elements of bread and wine, and how they symbolize the sacrificial life of Jesus, but we think also of meals Jesus shared with his disciples and with other people. We hear this morning in Luke 24 that the two disciples on the road to Emmaus did not recognize Jesus until they broke bread together at suppertime. We remember the famous stories that religious leaders scorned him for eating with “tax collectors and sinners.” We remember that he was also accused of being a glutton and a drunkard. He shared meals with all kinds of people, even those of questionable social status.

I want to share with you more of the creative writing of Rev. Lillian Daniel, who is a regular writer for the national UCC devotionals. In her book “When ‘Spiritual But Not Religious’ Is Not Enough,” she shares many stories from her life and experiences, and has a chapter dealing largely with school cafeteria experiences! She says: *By the time I got to high school, in the suburbs of Washington DC, I had already been to nine other schools. So I knew how to read the lunchroom tables like an anthropologist. Technically, you were free to sit anywhere you liked, but not really. There were the orchestra kids, the loud kids, the quiet kids, the jocks, the nerds. There was another table that apparently you could eat at only if you were pretty or handsome.*

When Jesus was fishing for disciples, he was looking in some pretty shallow pools. These were not necessarily the best and the brightest. He saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth, and he said follow me. And the tax collector got up and followed him. Now, tax collectors were the most hated group in the social system. They had sold out their Jewish friends to the empire. And as Jesus sat at dinner, all sorts of other tax collectors and sinners came and joined them. It was not the nerd table, not the jock table, but the sinner’s table. The rejects. There was Jesus with his disciples, not just eating with them, but recruiting leaders from within their ranks.

If we believe in the heavenly banquet, we ought to live it out here. For Jesus and the disciples, there were no assigned seats at the table. All were welcome, particularly in their brokenness. The church will always be criticized when it challenges the world on these issues. (The world would say: Rules are there to keep order, and if we keep to our own lunch tables, we will all be better off.) And the myth of that story is that you could keep all the sinners at their own table. Which is, of course, wrong, as there are sinners at every table! (And I would add: There are wounded, broken, suffering people...at every table.)

When churches share refreshments together, whether a meal, or coffee hour, or the communion meal, we do well to remember that all have some sin or suffering, that it is a meal of grace where everyone is welcome and needs nourishment. Or as Rev. Lillian and many others have said: *The church is a school for sinners, not a club of saints.* (It's a school, because we all are growing in our ability to love and make peace... and I would add, "we are a refuge for any who are wounded and suffering.")

In our Gospel Lesson from Luke 4, we hear a similar message when Jesus was reading from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. The message is that the Spirit of God comes especially to liberate any oppressed, to set free captives, to heal the blind, to tell good news to the poor. Jesus indicates that this is why he came, and that the prophecy was being fulfilled that very day in their hearing. Our first reaction to these words is probably, "Oh, that's nice: God comes to poor and blind and oppressed people!" (Over there). But one day, at a national conference with Henri Nouwen, I heard or understood for the first time... that WE are the poor and the blind and the oppressed, as were the hearers of Jesus that day! Jesus spoke to those attending his home synagogue, to those attending church, and said "This scripture is fulfilled (at this moment) in YOUR hearing!" Sure, we need to go to the streets and minister to people in need, but we ALL

are part of the poor or poor in spirit, with some suffering, and needing the Good News and healing Grace of Jesus' Presence!

I'm going to close with a song that I love to play and sing, by Mike Mirabella, entitled "*Sister Butterfly!*" It showed up in Christian Fellowship songbooks some 50 years ago, but of course it is timeless. He wrote the song for his daughter, a "special needs" child with Down's Syndrome. Perhaps when you listen to the song, you could remember someone in your life, (or even yourself), who has limits, wounds, suffering, someone that needs more grace and love, liberation and acceptance in this world.... for that is why Jesus came.

1. *My sister is a butterfly who never learned to fly. Her secret world is hidden in the silence of her eyes. She often seems quite distant, and I wonder if she knows, how much I really love her, how I feel her in my soul. Refrain: Walk with me, I'll teach you, talk to me, I'll reach you. Don't turn away or be frightened to say, Hey, I need you. You're beautiful. I love you.* 2. *You can look among the flowers, but I doubt if she'll be found. She'll be sitting in a corner, or be fluttering on the ground. She isn't polished in her ways, nor graceful like a dancer. But she can ask you questions, for which there are no given answers. Refrain.* 3. *She's a very special butterfly, an angel in disguise. Not everyone will look for her, and few will even try. But if you find her, please be gentle when you hold her in your hands. Speak to her with a loving heart, I know she'll understand. Refrain.*

The song, and Jesus words from Isaiah, teach us that we need to be gentle with one another, since we all have some experience of blindness, oppression, sin and suffering. Amen.